

Looking Back:

Downtown Burlington Burns Twice: 1918 and 1964

In every community, there are tales of the “big fire,” and Burlington is no different. In many instances the renowned fires were truly “big” — ending up as conflagrations that destroyed the central business district and tremendously impacted the fledgling economy. In the early days, Burlington’s city district was only about one square mile, and unfortunately fire protection was not a high priority. In fact, the town’s fire service mainly consisted of an unorganized group of individuals with a bucket or two, but no consistent department to count on.

In 1901, a group of seven men under the leadership of Mr. Banks Teague gathered in the original City Hall to lay the groundwork for the Burlington Volunteer Fire Department. Once established, this volunteer unit continued to grow and flourish, and soon obtained its first piece of motorized apparatus, a Dodge pickup truck modified by two key members of the department, Bunk Burke and George Clapp.

This homemade apparatus would be tested in 1918, when a fire started in the M.B. Smith Furniture store, located on South Main Street between Front and Davis Streets. The wind-driven fire quickly destroyed most of the businesses, overwhelming the members of the Burlington Volunteer Fire Department. Fearing that the entire business district would be destroyed, the City of Greensboro was called upon. Records indicate that several Greensboro fire apparatus were placed on railcars and shipped to Burlington, along with personnel reinforcements. This early mutual aid agreement was instrumental in stopping the fire’s progress. The area was rebuilt in 1919, and once again, became the town’s business hub.

Shortly after the 1918 fire, the Burlington Fire Department became more organized and efficient — a foundation that would prove important when, 46 years later, downtown Burlington would once again face a threatening fire.

But in the years leading up to that blaze, the service to Burlington citizens evolved dramatically. The men leading the Department changed, equipment was added and the Department slowly grew into a formidable organization. In 1919, the Department purchased an American LaFrance 750 gpm rotary gear pump, chain drive engine. A few years later, after Chief Charlie Hebrin handed over the reins to Grover Moore, the agency bought an additional piece of motorized apparatus for \$8,000. When Fire Company No. 2 opened, a second 750 gpm rotary gear, chain driven American LaFrance came into service (a truck that is still a member of the Burlington Fire Department on standby at Station 5).

The Department changed leadership again in 1948 when Roma C. Fortune left the City of Greensboro Fire Department to become the first paid chief of the Burlington Fire Department. He began his tenure by hiring six full-time members while continuing to supplement the paid staff with 25 volunteers. As the Burlington Fire Department grew, Chief Fortune encouraged its members to make training and fire prevention efforts a priority. He instituted regularly scheduled Wednesday afternoon exercises with mock calls and various training drills. This training would pay off in 1964 when the Department was called to battle a second large-scale fire threatening downtown.

On Dec. 23, 1964, the 300 block of South Main Street was active with last-minute Christmas shoppers. Most stores were open late, until about 9 p.m., to provide the shop owners one last

chance to move their wares.

At that time, the 300 block of South Main Street was home to The Glamor Shop, Phoenix Furniture Store, Mebane Shoe Company and Apple’s Shoe Store. At 9:40 p.m. a City of Burlington police officer noticed heavy smoke coming from the shopping district. Upon further investigation the officer discovered the source of the smoke — a rapidly spreading fire located at 355 South Main Street, home of The Glamor Shop. The

A fire of this magnitude required the general response of all members of the Burlington Fire Department, both on and off duty. Records indicate that at least 40 firemen from Burlington fought this fire with assistance from volunteers with Faucette, Mebane, Elon College, Eli Whitney and Altamahaw Ossippee.

Over the course of the fire, four injuries to firefighting staff occurred: J.W. Ward suffered first and second degree burns on his legs and J.P. Love, T. R. Fuller and F. Andrews were overcome



officer immediately went to the Burlington Fire Department headquarters located at the corner of Front and Worth Streets, where he turned in a voice alarm for the fire.

The entire complement of on-duty fire fighting staff and equipment responded, including the Department’s 1935 Peter Pirsch Sons and Company 50-foot hook and ladder truck with the mechanical hoisting ladder.

“Smoke was belching from the building when I arrived at the scene,” recalls Chief Fortune. “There were no flames visible, but there was so much smoke that it was difficult at first glance to determine in which building the actual fire occurred. When we opened the building, the flames were then visible.

by smoke. Firemen Ward, Love and Fuller were manning the ladder truck, which lacked any type of compressed breathing air equipment. The extended period of time operating in the thermal column caused their injuries. Andrews’ injuries were caused by a roof collapse as he was being lowered through a hole in the roof to check fire conditions.

For close to three hours crews battled the blaze, and despite their tremendous efforts both The Glamor Shop and Apples Shoe Shop were totally destroyed. While officials determined the fire originated in The Glamor Shop, the exact cause of the fire was never determined. The fire’s damages were estimated to be more than \$250,000.